

# Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Chatto & Windus 1957; rep. Univ. of California Press 1957).

Note: this copy has been made from a PDF version of the 1957 California UP edition. The foot-notes in that edition have been transposed to end-notes here and the page-numbers have been omitted.

## CHAPTER VIII: Fielding and the Epic Theory of the Novel

SINCE it was *Pamela* that supplied the initial impetus for the writing of *Joseph Andrews*, Fielding cannot be considered as having made quite so direct a contribution as Richardson to the rise of the novel, and he is therefore given somewhat less extensive treatment here. His works in any case raise very different problems, since their distinguishing elements have their roots not so much in social change as in the neo-classical literary tradition. This in itself may be regarded as presenting something of a challenge to the basic argument of the present study: if the main features of *Tom Jones*, for example, were in fact the result of an independent and autonomous development within the Augustan world of letters, and if these features later became typical of the novel in general, it is evident that the crucial importance attributed above to the role of social change in bringing about the rise of the new form could hardly be sustained.

Fielding's celebrated formula of 'the comic epic in prose' undoubtedly lends some authority to the view that, far from being the unique literary expression of modern society, the novel is essentially a continuation of a very old and honoured narrative tradition. This view is certainly widely enough held, albeit in a rather general and unformulated way, to deserve consideration.

It is evident that since the epic was the first example of a narrative form on a large scale and of a serious kind, it is reasonable that it should give its name to the general category which contains all such works: and in this sense of the term the novel may be said to be of the epic kind. One can perhaps go further, and, like Hegel, regard the novel as a manifestation of the spirit of epic under the impact of a modern and prosaic concept of reality. [1] Nevertheless, it is surely evident that the actual similarities are of such a theoretical and abstract nature that one cannot make much of them without neglecting most of the specific literary characteristics of the two forms: the epic is, after all, an oral and poetic genre dealing with the public and usually remarkable deeds of historical or legendary persons engaged in a collective rather than an individual enterprise; and none of these things can be said of the novel.

They certainly cannot be said of the novels of Defoe or Richardson; and as it so happens that their occasional remarks about the epic do something to illuminate the social and literary differences between the two genres, their views on the subject will be briefly considered before Fielding's conception of the epic analogy, and the nature of its contribution to his novels are investigated.

### I

Apart from one rather conventional contrast between 'the immortal Virgil's ... accurate judgement' and Homer's 'more fertile and copious invention and fancy', [2] Defoe's general attitude to epic was one of casual depreciation: 'It is easy to tell you the Consequences of Popular Confusions, Private Quarrels, and Party Feuds, without Reading Virgil, Horace, or Homer', he writes in *The Review* (1705), [3] and in a 1711 pamphlet, *The Felonious Treaty*, he tells us that the siege of Troy was all for 'the Rescue of a Whore'. [4] This view of Helen was not uncommon: but the terseness of Defoe's reduction of the whole matter to a simple moral judgement reminds us how the primacy of ethical considerations in the literary outlook of the middle class was likely to undermine much of the prestige of classical literature. Defoe's condemnation of the 'long ago exploded ... Latin bawdy authors Tibullus, Propertius and others', [5] and his lament that there was 'not a Moralist among the Greeks but Plutarch', [6] may serve as further confirmations of this tendency.

If Defoe did not approve of Homer as a moralist he was even more explicit in condemning him as a historian. Defoe's interest in literature was almost exclusively dictated by his voracious appetite for

facts, and Homer's value as a repository of fact obviously had serious limitations, as did oral tradition in general.

This theme occurs as early as the preface to *The Storm* in 1704, and is very fully developed in Defoe's *Essay upon Literature*, published in 1726.

By literature Defoe means writing. His general thesis is that the art of writing was a divine gift given by Moses which enabled man to escape from 'that most corrupting, multiplying Usage of Tradition', that is, the primitive, 'oral History of Men and Things', which in fact always tended to turn history into 'Fable and Romance', 'Scoundrels' into 'Heroes', and 'Heroes' into 'Gods'.

Homer was a very notable offender in this respect. His works are irreplaceable historical documents: we should know nothing of 'the Siege of Troy, were it unsung by Homer'; and yet, unfortunately, 'even now we scarce know whether it is a History, or that Ballad-Singer's Fable to get a Penny'. [7] This last phrase echoes Defoe's most extended reference to Homer, which occurs in the course of a very amusing intervention in the controversy which arose over Pope's unacknowledged collaboration with Broome and Fenton on his translation of the *Odyssey*. Writing in *Applebee's Journal*, where indiscriminate impudence was at a premium, Defoe argues that it is ridiculous to single out Pope for attack, since all writers, from Homer down, have been plagiarists:

... a Merry Fellow of my Acquaintance assures me, that our cousin Homer himself was guilty of the same Plagiarism. Cousin Homer you must note was an old blind Ballad Singer at Athens, and went about the country there, and at other Places in Greece, singing his Ballads from Door to Door; only with this difference, that the Ballads he sung were generally of his own making... .

But, says my Friend, this Homer, in Process of Time, when he had gotten some Fame,—and perhaps more Money than Poets ought to be trusted with, grew Lazy and Knavish, and got one Andronicus a Spartan, and one Dr. S---l, a Philosopher of Athens, both pretty good Poets, but less eminent than himself, to make his songs for him; which, they being poor and starving, did for him for a small Matter. And so, the Poet never did much himself, only published and sold his Ballads still, in his own Name, as if they had been his own; and by that, got great Subscriptions, and a high Price for them. [8]

Defoe had close precedents for this picture of Homer—d' Aubignac and Perrault in France, and more recently Bentley and Henry Felton in England, had seen the Homeric poems as collections of the songs of a strolling bard; [9] but the account of Homer as a plagiary and a successful literary entrepreneur seems to have been invented to suit the argument of the moment. Defoe's strategy—to reduce all literary matters to their commercial equivalent—is perfectly calculated not only to undermine the prestige of epic and the classical premises of Augustan culture, but also to reduce the great ones of literature to the same low Grub Street level to which they had contemptuously relegated him.

Defoe had yet another important objection to Homer—the fact that he shared the pagan credulity of his age. One of his conclusions in *A System of Magic* (1727) is that 'the Greeks were the most superstitious of all the Devil-worshippers in the World, worse than the Persians and Chaldeans', and that their religious literature was vitiated by the 'infernal juggles' of the devil who continually 'chops in' with 'a horrid Rhapsody of complicated Idolatry'. [10] In another work, *The History and Reality of Apparitions* (1727), Defoe examines the statements of Homer and Virgil on apparitions, and concludes scornfully: 'What learned Nonsense, and what a great deal of it is here, to reconcile a thing, which, upon the Christian foundation, is made as easy as anything not immediately visible to the common eye can be made!' [11] This note of hardly concealed impatience at the irrational and immoral idolatry of the ancients is a suitable one on which to leave Defoe. Homer could have been a most valuable source of historical evidence. But—partly because of his own inveterate ballad-mongering, and partly because of the obdurate superstitiousness of the Greek civilization—he sang 'the Wars of the Greeks ... from a Reality, into a meer Fiction ...' [12] If only Troy had had a really good journalist!

## II

One would not expect from Richardson's cautious temperament the defiant assertion of personal opinion that came so naturally to Defoe; but, with two minor exceptions, [13] a similar hostility to the epic can be discerned in his novels and letters.

Richardson's main antipathy to the heroic genre was, as we should expect, based on the manners and morals which it exhibited. His most outspoken attack occurs in a letter to Lady Bradshaigh, who had apparently initiated a correspondence with him on the dire consequences of epic poetry:

I admire you for what you say of the fierce, fighting Iliad. Scholars, judicious scholars, dared they to speak out, against a prejudice of thousands of years in its favour, I am persuaded would find it possible for Homer to nod, at least. I am afraid this poem, noble as it truly is, has done infinite mischief for a series of ages; since to it, and its copy the Eneid, is owing, in a great measure, the savage spirit that has actuated, from the earliest ages to this time, the fighting fellows, that, worse than lions or tigers, have ravaged the earth, and made it a field of blood. [14]

The ideas in the attack are not original. Pope had written that 'the most shocking' thing in Homer was 'that spirit of cruelty which appears too manifestly in the *Iliad*'. [15] And it is obvious that since, in epic, warfare is 'an essential rather than an accessory', [16] its moral world stands for values which are alien and unwelcome to the members of a peace-loving society. Richardson, however, goes a good deal further, and his talk of the 'infinite mischief' done by the *Aeneid* is substantially new, and anticipates Blake's more general accusation that '... it is the Classics ... that Desolate Europe with Wars'. [17]

The dangerous sanction which the prestige of epic afforded vicious models of individual behaviour was an abiding preoccupation with Richardson. In *Grandison* Lady Charlotte repeats his views as given to Lady Bradshaigh almost verbatim, but finishes by broadening the charge:

... men and women are cheats to one another. But we may, in a great measure, thank the poetical tribe for the fascination. I hate them all. Are they not inflamers of the worst passions? With regard to epics, would Alexander, madman as he was, have been so *much* a madman, had it not been for Homer? Of what violences, murders, depredations, have not the epic poets been the occasion, by propagating false honours, false glory, and false religion? [18]

The epic's false code of honour, like that of heroic tragedy, was masculine, bellicose, aristocratic and pagan: it was therefore wholly unacceptable to Richardson, whose novels are largely devoted to attacking this ideology, and replacing it by a radically different one in which honour is internal, spiritual, and available without distinction of class or sex to all who had the will to act morally.

Richardson's fullest demonstration of the new type of heroism was *Sir Charles Grandison*, the result, he stated in his Preface, of the insistence of his friends that he 'produce into public view the character and actions of a man of TRUE HONOUR': and it makes much of the crucial social issue on which the new and the old codes of honour differ—the question of duelling. Although *Grandison* is an admirable swordsman, he is so determined an opponent of this barbarism that he even refuses a challenge. In the 'Concluding Note' Richardson defended this course of action very strongly. He reiterated Harriet Byron's opposition to the old code—'Murderous, vile word *honour*! ... the very opposite to duty, goodness, piety, religion ...'; [19] pointed out that the 'notion of honour is evidently an absurd and mischievous one'; and insisted that challenges to a duel are nothing less than 'polite invitations to murder' which every man of Christian principles should refuse, since 'true bravery is to adhere to all duties under disadvantages'.

There is much else in *Grandison*, as well as in *Pamela* and *Clarissa*, to support the view that Richardson's novels are the climax of a long-standing movement in Christian and middleclass apologetics against the glamour of the pagan and warrior virtues.

Steele had wondered 'why the Heathen struts, and the Christian sneaks in our imagination?' [20] Defoe had suggested as a solution that the real test of courage was 'to dare to be good'. [21] Richardson

gave models of this daring: but the conflict between the active and extroverted ideals of the Homeric world and his own way of life is perhaps even more clearly shown in his sedentary and suburban reflection to Miss Highmore that ‘In such a world as this, and with a feeling heart, content is heroism!’ [22] Richardson’s distaste for the heroic virtues would alone, perhaps, have been enough to lead him to reject the epic as a literary model; but, of course, the rejection was very likely on many other grounds.

In the early half of the eighteenth century there was an increasing awareness of the great and numerous disparities between the Homeric and the contemporary world. This tendency was most notably expressed by Thomas Blackwell, whose *Enquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer* (1735) gave a more detailed answer than ever before to the much-debated question of why no later poet had been able to achieve the greatness of an *Iliad* or an *Odyssey*. Blackwell’s main thesis was that Homer had received unique poetic advantages from his social environment, advantages which could not be duplicated in eighteenth-century England; living in a period of transition between complete barbarism and the sloth of settled commercial civilisation, Homer had rejoiced in a naturally heroic culture when ‘living by Plunder gave a Reputation for Spirit and Bravery’. Nor was Homer’s audience composed of ‘the Inhabitants of a great *luxurious* City’, but of simpler and more martial folk who wanted to listen to tales of ‘the Prowess of their Ancestors’. [23]

Three of the applications which Blackwell makes of this contrast are very relevant to the differences between the epic and the novel in general, and to the conditions underlying Richardson’s literary innovations in particular. Homer’s poems, Blackwell writes, were ‘made to be recited, or sung to a *Company*; and not read in private, or perused in a *Book*’. Secondly, ‘the *natural* Greek ... covered none of his Sentiments’ and for this reason Blackwell prefers them to his contemporaries ‘with more refined but double characters’. Lastly, since epic portrays ‘more natural Manners’, it follows not only that the contemporary writer must ‘*unlearn* [his] daily way of life’ if he is to ‘poetize in the higher strains’, but that the reader of epic must project himself into persons and situations that he is likely to find both unusual and unpleasant. So Blackwell, with all his enthusiasm for Homer, cannot but conclude that although his patron ‘may regret the Silence of the Muses, yet I am persuaded your Lordship will join in the Wish, *That we may never be the proper Subject of an Heroic Poem*’. [24]

Blackwell’s views go far to explain the unpopularity of the epic with the reading public of his day, and the popularity of the novel. That the epic was unpopular can be surmised, for example, from Richardson’s suggestion to Aaron Hill in 1744 that when he published his *Gideon, An Epic Poem*, he should not ‘call it epic in the title page, since hundreds who see the title, will not, at the same time, have seen your admirable definition of the word’. [25] This unpopularity must have been connected with the fact that reading epic meant a continuous effort to exclude the normal expectations of everyday contemporary life—the very expectations which the novel exploited. Addison had already said in the *Spectator* that when reading Homer it was difficult not to feel that ‘you were reading the History of another Species’: [26] while Voltaire, in his early *Essay on Epic Poetry* (1727), had specifically contrasted the very different ways that the *Iliad* and Madame de La Fayette’s *Zaïde* were read by his contemporaries: ‘it is very strange, yet true, that among the most learned, and the greatest Admirers of Antiquity, there is scarce one to be found, who ever read the *Iliad*, with that Eagerness and Rapture, which a Woman feels when she reads the *Novel of Zaïda*’. [27]

Not only must the feminine devotees of *Zaïde*—and *Pamela*—have found it difficult to identify themselves with Homer’s characters; they must also have been shocked by his treatment of their sex. Greek men, Blackwell tells us, were not ashamed of ‘their natural appetites’; [28] and, as James Macpherson was later to say, ‘Homer, of all ancient poets, uses the sex with least ceremony’. [29] This scandalous indelicacy supplies a further reason for Richardson’s antipathy—it is noticeable that his attacks on the epic were stimulated by a feminine correspondent, and expressed mainly through his female characters. In *Sir Charles Grandison*, for instance, Harriet Byron is a strong supporter of the claims of Christian epic and of Milton, as against Homer, and she cites Addison’s papers in the *Spectator*, as well as ‘the admirable Mr. Deane’, to support her position; on the other hand, Homer gets the most damaging kind of support—the praise of pedantic males like Mr. Walden, or of forward and

masculine disgraces to the female sex such as Miss Barnevelt, of whom Miss Byron reports to Miss Selby, in tones that echo Richardson's own ejaculatory horror to Lady Bradshaigh, that 'Achilles, the savage Achilles, charmed her'. [30] Even more damning, perhaps, is the fact that in *Clarissa* the infamous Lovelace is tarred with the epic feather. He justifies his treatment of *Clarissa* by Virgilian precedent, asking Belford whether he is not 'as much entitled to forgiveness on Miss Harlowe's account, as Virgil was on Queen Dido's?'; and is even impudent enough to argue that since he does not have 'half the obligation to her that Aeneas had to the Queen of Carthage', there is no reason why it should not be 'the pious Lovelace, as well as the pious Aeneas'. [31] A late eighteenth-century essayist, Martin Sherlock, expressed a fairly widely held view when he wrote that Richardson's 'misfortune was that he did not know the Ancients'. [32] The opposite is much more likely to be the case, at least as far as his literary originality is concerned, and it is significant that in his later years Richardson became an ardent supporter of the Moderns against the Ancients. This is made clear by the part he played in the composition of Edward Young's *Conjectures on Original Composition in a Letter to the Author of Sir Charles Grandison* (1759), where, as A. D. McKillop has shown, [33] he was responsible for a general sharpening of Young's polemic in the direction of a new anti-classical hierarchy of literary values. One celebrated passage of the *Conjectures* which was actually written by Richardson suggests that he was also aware of having a personal stake in the controversy: After all, the first ancients had no merit in being originals: they could not be imitators. Modern writers have a choice to make; and therefore have a merit in their power. They may soar in the regions of liberty, or move in the soft fetters of easy imitation; and imitation has as many plausible reasons to urge, as pleasure had to offer Hercules. Hercules made the choice of an hero, and so became immortal. [34] Richardson's ulterior purpose is transparent. He had been an original, not willy-nilly, like Homer, but by a deliberate rejection of previous models. The new literary Hercules was, of course, being brave after the event, since we have no evidence of his serious concern with classical models until after the completion of *Clarissa*. But we must accede to part of Richardson's plea: the originality which secured his immortality was connected, whether by accident or design, with his neglect of established literary models in favour of his own vivid awareness of life, and the unconventional but peculiarly appropriate methods which enabled him to express it directly and naturally.

### III

Unlike Defoe and Richardson, Fielding was steeped in the classical tradition, and though he was by no means a slavish supporter of the Rules, he felt strongly that the growing anarchy of literary taste called for drastic measures. In the *Covent Garden Journal*, for example, he proposed that 'No author is to be admitted into the Order of Critics, until he hath read over, and understood, Aristotle, Horace, and Longinus, in their original Language'. [35] Similar qualifications, he felt, were particularly necessary to preserve the new realm of fiction against what George Eliot once eloquently described as 'the intrusions of mere left-handed imbecility'; 'a good share of learning', he suggested in *Tom Jones*, was an essential prerequisite for those who wished to write 'such histories as these', [36] and such learning was undoubtedly intended to include a knowledge of Latin and Greek.

It is therefore wholly in keeping with his general outlook that in *Joseph Andrews* (1742), his first work in the novel genre, Fielding should have been at pains to justify his enterprise both to himself and to his literary peers by bringing it into line with the classical critical tradition. Nor could there be much doubt as to what direction such a justification should take. Many previous writers and critics of fiction, notably of the seventeenth-century French romances, had assumed that any imitation of human life in narrative form ought to be assimilated as far as possible to the rules that had been laid down for the epic by Aristotle and his innumerable interpreters; and Fielding—apparently quite independently—started from the same point of view. [37] He began his Preface by suggesting, somewhat patronisingly perhaps, that 'As it is possible the mere English reader may have a different idea of romance from the author of these little volumes ... it may not be improper to premise a few words concerning this kind of writing, which I do not remember to have seen hitherto attempted in our language'. He then continued:

The Epic, as well as the Drama, is divided into tragedy and comedy. Homer, who was the father of this species of poetry, gave us a pattern of both these, though that of the latter kind is entirely lost; which Aristotle tells us, bore the same relation to comedy which his *Iliad* bears to tragedy ...

And farther, as this poetry may be tragic or comic, I will not scruple to say it may be likewise either in verse or prose; for though it wants one particular, which the critic enumerates in the constituent parts of an epic poem, namely metre; yet, when any kind of writing contains all its other parts, such as fable, action, characters, sentiments, and diction, and is deficient in metre only; it seems, I think, reasonable to refer it to the epic; at least as no critic hath thought proper to range it under any other head, or to assign it a particular name to itself.

Fielding's argument here for 'referring' his novel to the epic genre is unimpressive: *Joseph Andrews*, no doubt, has five out of the six parts under which Aristotle considered epic; but then it is surely impossible to conceive of any narrative whatever which does not in some way contain 'fable, action, characters, sentiments, and diction'.

The possession of these five elements certainly does nothing to elucidate the distinction which Fielding goes on to make between the prose epic and French romances:

Thus the Telemachus of the archbishop of Cambray appears to me of the epic kind, as well as the *Odyssey* of Homer; indeed, it is much fairer and more reasonable to give it a name common with that species from which it differs only in a single instance, than to confound it with those which it resembles in no other.

Such are those voluminous works, commonly called Romances, namely Clelia, Cleopatra, Astrae, Cassandra, the Grand Cyrus, and innumerable others, which contain, as I apprehend, very little instruction or entertainment.

Fielding's distinction between Fénelon's *Télémaque* and the French heroic romances, it will be observed, is entirely based on the introduction of a new factor, 'instruction or entertainment', which is obviously a question of personal value judgements, and therefore very difficult to fit into any general analytic scheme. It is not surprising, therefore, that when Fielding goes on to distinguish his own 'comic epic in prose' from serious epic and its prose analogues he makes no use of this criterion either; instead he applies the Aristotelian distinction between the serious and the comic modes in a way that would actually put all the French romances in the same category as the *Odyssey* and *Télémaque*: Now a comic romance is a comic epic poem in prose; differing from comedy, as the serious epic from tragedy: its action being more extended and comprehensive; containing a much larger circle of incidents, and introducing a greater variety of characters. It differs from the serious romance in its fable and action, in this; that as in the one these are grave and solemn, so in the other they are light and ridiculous; it differs in its characters, by introducing persons of inferior ... manners, whereas the grave romance sets the highest before us; lastly, in its sentiments and diction, by preserving the ludicrous instead of the sublime.

This completes Fielding's critical exposition of the epic analogy in the Preface to *Joseph Andrews*. It is obvious that the whole operative force of the argument depends on the term comic, and the remainder of the preface, comprising some five-sixths of the total, is engaged in developing his ideas of 'the ludicrous'. This, of course, is inevitably accompanied by the dropping of the epic analogy; for, since Homer's *Margites* was lost, and the comic epic received but a bare mention in the *Poetics*, Fielding's attempts to bring his novel into line with classical doctrine could not be supported either by existing literary parallel or theoretical precedent.

Before considering the practical effects of the epic analogy on the novels, it should perhaps be pointed out that what has been reproduced above constitutes almost everything that Fielding said about the comic epic in prose. *Joseph Andrews* was a hurriedly composed work of somewhat mixed intentions, begun as a parody of *Pamela* and continued in the spirit of Cervantes; and this perhaps suggests that not too much importance should be attached to its Preface, which does not really adumbrate a whole theory of fiction; it merely, as Fielding himself says, contains 'some few very short hints'. The formula of 'the comic epic poem in prose' is only such a hint; and although Fielding referred to it briefly in his preface to his sister Sarah's *David Simple* (1744), and subsequently called *Tom Jones* (1749) a 'heroic, historical, prosaic poem' and a specimen of 'prosai-comi-epic writing', [38] he did not develop or modify his early formula in his later writings; indeed, he paid very little further attention to it.

#### IV

Since it was a comic variant of epic that Fielding wished to produce he was debarred from imitating two at least of its component parts—characters and sentiments; heroic persons and sublime thoughts obviously had no place in *Joseph Andrews* or *Tom Jones*. Some aspects of epic plot could, however, be adapted to his purpose, and epic diction could be used in burlesque form.

Even as regards plot, it is true, the differences were bound to be more marked than the similarities: comic characters could hardly be allowed to perform heroic acts, and whereas epic plots were based on history or legend, Fielding had to invent his stories. The most that he could do, therefore, was to retain some other general features of the epic plot while altering the content. The best example of this is probably *Tom Jones*, whose action has epic quality at least in the sense that it presents a sweeping panorama of a whole society, as opposed to Richardson's detailed picture of a very small social group.

But although the magnitude and variety of the structure of *Tom Jones* fit in very well with the chief connotation of the term 'epic' today, it is, after all, mainly a question of scale, and it cannot be held as evidence of any specific indebtedness on Fielding's part to an epic prototype. There are, however, at least two other more definite ways in which Fielding transposed characteristic features of the epic plot into a comic context: his use of surprise, and his introduction of mock-heroic battles.

It was generally agreed in neo-classical theory that the action of epic was characterised by two elements—verisimilitude and the marvellous: the ways in which these incongruous bedfellows could be happily mated had taxed all the ingenuity of the Renaissance critics, and their somewhat sophistic arguments had later been retailed by many of the French writers of romance. Fielding attacked the problem in the introductory chapter to the eighth book of *Tom Jones*. He began by excusing the incredible episodes in Homer on the grounds that he 'wrote to heathens, to whom poetical fables were articles of faith'; even so, Fielding could not refrain from wishing that Homer could have known and obeyed Horace's rule prescribing that supernatural agents be introduced 'as little as possible'. In any case, Fielding proceeded, writers of epic and genuine historians were able to introduce unlikely events much more plausibly than novelists, since they recorded 'public transactions' which were already known, whereas 'we who deal in private character ... have no public notoriety, no concurrent testimony, no records to support and corroborate what we deliver'. He concluded that it 'becomes' the novelist 'to keep within the limits not only of possibility, but of probability too'.

Fielding, then, prescribed a greater emphasis on verisimilitude for the new genre than that current in epic or romance. He qualified this, however, by admitting that since 'the great art of poetry is to mix truth with fiction, in order to join the credible with the surprising', 'complaisance to the scepticism of the reader' should not be taken to a point at which the only characters or incidents permitted are 'trite, common, or vulgar; such as may happen in every street, or in every house, or which may be met with in the home articles of a newspaper'.

What Fielding actually means by 'the surprising' is made clear by the context: he is referring primarily to the series of coincidences whereby *Tom Jones* successively meets the beggar who has picked up Sophia's pocket-book, the Merry Andrew who has seen her pass along the road, and her actual guide for part of the route; more generally, to the way that hero and heroine continually cross each other's path on their journey to London without ever meeting. Fielding valued such devices because they made it possible to weave the whole narrative into a very neat and entertaining formal structure; but although such apposite juxtapositions of persons and events do not violate verisimilitude so obviously as the supernatural interventions that are common in Homer or Virgil, it is surely evident that they nevertheless tend to compromise the narrative's general air of literal authenticity by suggesting the manipulated sequences of literature rather than the ordinary processes of life. Thus even Fielding's relatively inconspicuous concessions to the doctrine of the marvellous tended to confirm, as far as the novel was concerned, the reality of the dilemma of the would-be writer of epic in modern times which

Blackwell had stated in his *Enquiry*: ‘The marvellous and wonderful is the nerve of the epic strain: but what marvellous things happen in a well ordered state? We can hardly be surprised.’ [39]

Fielding’s most obvious imitation of the epic model in the action of his novels—the mock-heroic battles—is also somewhat at variance both with the dictates of formal realism and with the life of his time. Either because the events themselves are inherently improbable—as is the case, for instance, with the fight between Joseph Andrews and the pack of hounds that is pursuing Parson Adams [40]—or because they are narrated in such a way as to deflect our attention from the events themselves to the way that Fielding is handling them and to epic parallels involved. This is actually the case in the episode from *Joseph Andrews*, and it is even more obviously so in Moll Seagrim’s celebrated churchyard battle in *Tom Jones*. [41] The spectacle of a village mob assaulting a pregnant girl after church service is in itself anything but amusing, and only Fielding’s burlesque manner, his ‘Homerian style’, enables him to maintain the comic note. It is certain that this and some other episodes would be quite unacceptable if Fielding directed our attention wholly to the actions and feelings of the participants; and, even so, it may be doubted whether the Moll Seagrim scene, at least, coming from so humane a man as Fielding, does not give some colour to Richardson’s objections to the bellicose influence of epic.

Fielding’s Homerian style itself suggests a somewhat ambiguous attitude to the epic model: were it not for the Preface we would surely be justified in taking *Joseph Andrews* as a parody of epic procedures rather than as the work of a writer who planned to use them as a basis for the new genre: and even if we take account of the Preface, Fielding’s novel surely reflects the ambiguous attitude of his age, an age whose characteristic literary emphasis on the mock-heroic reveals how far it was from the epic world it so much admired.

The reasons for this ambivalence, indeed, are evident in the Preface to *Joseph Andrews*, where Fielding by implication admits that the direct imitation of the epic was in opposition to the imitation of ‘nature’ when he states that although he has allowed ‘parodies or burlesque imitations’ in his diction, chiefly for the ‘entertainment’ of ‘the classical reader’, he has ‘carefully excluded’ them from his sentiments and characters because it is his major intention to confine himself ‘strictly to nature, from the just imitation of which will flow all the pleasure we can ... convey to the sensible reader’. The difficulty with such a dual attitude, of course, is that, as a good Aristotelian like Fielding must have known, no single component of a literary work can in fact be treated as an independent entity. He argues in *Tom Jones*, for example, that without ‘sundry similes, descriptions, and other kind of poetical embellishments the best narrative of plain matter of fact must overpower every reader’; but when he goes on to inform us that the introduction of the heroine requires ‘the utmost solemnity in our power, with an elevation of style, and all other circumstance proper to raise the veneration of our reader’, [42] and follows this with a chapter entitled ‘A Short Hint of what we can do in the Sublime, and a Description of Miss Sophia Western’, which begins: ‘Hushed be every ruder breath. May the heathen ruler of the winds confine in iron chains the boisterous limbs of noisy Boreas’—it is surely evident that Fielding has achieved his ‘poetical embellishment’ at a very considerable price: Sophia never wholly recovers from so artificial an introduction, or at least never wholly disengages herself from the ironical attitude which it has induced.

A similar diminution of the reader’s belief in the authenticity of the character or the action occurs whenever the usual tenor of Fielding’s narrative is interrupted by the stylistic devices of epic; this surely underlines the fact that the conventions of formal realism compose an inseparable whole, of which the linguistic one is an integral part; or, as one of his contemporaries, Lord Monboddo, put it, Fielding’s abandonment of his ‘simple and familiar’ style impaired ‘the probability of the narrative, which ought to be carefully studied in all ... imitations of real life and manners’. [43]

## V

Fielding’s last novel, *Amelia* (1751), is wholly serious in moral purpose and narrative manner; and its allegiance to the epic model is of a very different kind. There is no reference to the formula of the



comic epic in prose, and both mock-heroic incidents and epic diction have been abandoned; in their place, as Fielding announced in the *Covent Garden Journal*, Virgil's *Aeneid* 'was the noble model, which I have made use of on this occasion'. [44] Booth also is an unemployed soldier, the episode in Newgate with Miss Matthews refers to the loves of Aeneas and Dido in the cave, and there are some other slight parallels which have been outlined by George Sherburn. [45] It will be noted that this kind of analogy involves no more than a kind of narrative metaphor which assists the imagination of the writer to find a pattern for his own observation of life without in any way detracting from the novel's appearance of literal veracity: nor does the reader need to know about the analogy to appreciate *Amelia*, as he does with the burlesque passages in Fielding's earlier novels. For these reasons *Amelia* may be regarded as the work in which the influence of the epic on Fielding was most fruitful; and it is certainly here that he had his most illustrious successor. When T. S. Eliot, with that leap into hyperbole which seems mandatory whenever the relation of novel and epic is being mooted, writes that James Joyce's use of the epic parallel in *Ulysses* 'has the importance of a scientific discovery', [46] and claims that 'no one else has built a novel upon such a foundation before', he is surely being distinctly unfair to Fielding's no doubt fragmentary application of a similar idea.

After *Amelia*, Fielding continued to move away from his earlier literary outlook. He came to see the insufficiency of his early views of affectation as the only source of the ridiculous, and therefore of comedy, and his increasingly serious moral outlook even made him find much to regret in two of his early comic favourites, Aristophanes and Rabelais. [47] At the same time his attitude towards epic changed, a change whose climax comes in the Preface to *The Journal of a Voyage to Lisbon*:

But, in reality, the *Odyssey*, the *Telemachus*, and all of that kind, are to the voyage-writing I here intend, what romance is to true history, the former being the confounder and corrupter of the latter. I am far from supposing that Homer, Hesiod, and the other ancient poets and mythologists, had any settled design to pervert and confuse the records of antiquity; but it is certain that they have effected it; and for my part I must confess that I should have honoured and loved Homer more had he written a true history of his own times in humble prose, than those noble poems that have so justly collected the praise of all ages; for, though I read these with more admiration and astonishment, I still read Herodotus, Thucydides, and Xenophon with more amusement and more satisfaction.

The statement must be taken in its context. The *Odyssey* is obviously an unsatisfactory model for an account of an eighteenth-century voyage to Lisbon. Still, to couple *Télémaque* and the *Odyssey* as romances, represents a total reversal of Fielding's position in *Joseph Andrews*. The contrast between both of them, on the one hand, and 'true history' on the other is also taken far beyond what was needed for a prefatory explanation of the type of writing which he was proposing to follow; and Fielding comes very close to Defoe's position when he speaks of the way that Homer and the other 'original poets' corrupted historical truth. The reason he gives for their doing so is an interesting one: 'they found the limits of nature too straight for the immensity of their genius, which they had not room to exert without extending fact by fiction: and that especially at a time when the manners of men were too simple to afford that variety which they have since offered in vain to the choice of the meanest writers'.

Fielding, then, eventually came to see his own society as offering sufficient interest and variety to make possible a literary genre exclusively devoted to engaging the reader in a closer scrutiny of 'nature' and of modern 'manners' than had ever been attempted before: and his own literary development was certainly in this direction. *Amelia* is, as has often been said, much closer to Richardson's close study of domestic life than his previous works; and although Fielding did not live long enough to embody his reorientation in another novel, there seems to be no doubt that he had become conscious of the fact that his earlier applications of the epic analogy had been responsible for his most obvious divergences from the role proper to the faithful historian of the life of his time—a realisation, incidentally, which is implicit in his ironical defence of the epic diction in *Tom Jones* which was introduced, he explained, so that it 'might be in no danger of being likened to the labours of [modern] historians'. [48]

At the same time the extent of the influence of the epic analogy on Fielding's earlier novels must not be exaggerated. He called *Tom Jones* 'A History', and habitually described his role as that of

historian or biographer whose function was to give a faithful presentation of the life of his time. Fielding's conception of this role, it is true, was different from that of Defoe or Richardson, but the difference is mainly connected, not with his attempt to imitate epic, but with the general influence of the neo-classical tradition on every aspect of his work. The most specific literary debt manifested in *Tom Jones*, indeed, is not to epic but to drama: not so much because his main critical source, Aristotle's *Poetics*, was primarily concerned with drama and gave epic a secondary place, as because Fielding had been a dramatist himself for over a decade before attempting fiction. The remarkable coherence of the plot of *Tom Jones* surely owes little to the actual example of Homer or Virgil, and little more to Aristotle's insistence that 'in the Epic as in Tragedy, the story should be constructed on dramatic principles'; [49] it is very palpably the product of Fielding's experience as a practising dramatist. It is also highly likely, incidentally, that some of the other features of his novels, such as the coincidences and discoveries which provide surprise at the cost of a certain loss of authenticity, are also a legacy from the drama rather than from the epic; and even the burlesque and mock-heroic elements had appeared long ago in many of his plays, such as *Tom Thumb, a Tragedy* (1730).

Why, then, it may be asked, has the formula of the comic epic in prose so 'obsessed critics of novels', to use George Sherburn's phrase? [50] It no doubt makes an immediate appeal to those who, like Peacock's Dr. Folliott, habitually manifest 'a safe and peculiar inaccessibility to ideas except such as are recommended by an almost artless simplicity or a classical origin'; [51] and this perhaps gives a clue both to the reason why Fielding was led to invent the formula and to why it later flourished.

In 1742 the novel was a form in grave disrepute, and Fielding probably felt that to enlist the prestige of epic might help win for his first essay in the genre a less prejudiced hearing from the literati than might otherwise have been expected. In this Fielding was actually following the example of the French writers of romance a century earlier; they, too, had laid claim to the epic filiation in prefatory asseverations which were not so much accurate analyses of their achievement as attempts to assuage their own anxieties and those of their readers about the uncanonised nature of what was to follow in the text. Nor have such attempts to dissipate the odour of unsanctity in which prose fiction seems destined to have its being ceased even in our day—F. R. Leavis's 'The Novel as Dramatic Poem' would seem to be an analogous attempt to smuggle the novel into the critical Pantheon under the disguise of an ancient and honoured member.

At the same time, however, the fact that the formulae both of Fielding and of Leavis connect the novel with major poetic forms suggests an effort to put the genre into the highest possible literary context. Obviously both the creation and the criticism of the novel cannot but gain from this, and it is indeed likely that the most positive gain which Fielding derived from thinking about his narrative in terms of epic was that it encouraged him to as intense and serious a travail as the loftiest literary forms were presumed to demand.

Apart from this it is likely that the epic influence on Fielding was very slight, mainly retrograde, and of little importance in the later tradition of the novel. To call Fielding, as Ethel Thornbury does in her monograph on the subject, 'the founder of the English Prose epic' [52] is surely to award him a somewhat sterile paternity; Fielding's greatest followers, Smollett, Dickens and Thackeray, do not, for example, imitate the very few specifically epic features in his work. But, as we have seen, the idea of 'the comic epic in prose' is by no means Fielding's major claim on our attention: its main function was to suggest one of the high standards of literary achievement which he wished to keep in mind when he began on his new path in fiction; it was certainly not intended as yet another of the innumerable eighteenth-century 'Receipts to make an Epick Poem'; and this is fortunate, for, in literature at least, the nostrum killeth but the nostalgia may give life.

## Notes

1. See *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, trans. Osmaston (London, 1920), IV, 171.
2. *The Life of Mr. Duncan Campbell* (Oxford, 1841), p.86.

3. No. 39 (1705)
4. p.17.
5. *Mist's Journal*, April 5, 1719, cit. William Lee, *Daniel Defoe* (London, 1869), II, 31.
6. *Essay upon Literature* (1726), p.118.
7. pp.115, 17, 115, 117.
8. July 31, 1725; Defoe's two letters on the topic are reprinted in Lee (III, 410-414).
9. See Donald M. Foerster, *Homer in English Criticism* (New Haven, 1947), pp.17 23, 28.
10. Oxford, 1840, pp.226, 191, 193.
11. Oxford, 1840, pp.171-174.
12. p.22.
13. See Postscript, *Clarissa*, and *Grandison*, I, 284.
14. Correspondence, IV, 287; the letter is undated but was probably written in: 1749.
15. Note, *Iliad*, IV, 75, cited by Foerster, *Homer*, p.16.
16. H. M. and N. K. Chadwick, *The Growth of Literature* (Cambridge, 1936), II, 488.
17. In "On Homer's Poetry" (c. 1820); Poetry and Prose, ed. Keynes (London, 1946), p.583.
18. VI, 315.
19. *Grandison*, I, 304; see also *Clarissa*, IV, 461-463.
20. *The Christian Hero*, ed. Blanchard (London, 1932), p.15.
21. *Applebee's Journal*, August 29, 1724, cited from Lee, III, 299- 300.
22. *Correspondence*, II, 252 (July 20, 1750).
23. 2nd ed., 1736, pp.16, 123.
24. pp.122, 340, 24, 25, 28.
25. *Correspondence*, I, 122.
26. No. 209.
27. Florence D. White, *Voltaire's Essay on Epic Poetry: A Study and an Edition* (Albany, 1915), p.90.
28. *Enquiry*, p.340.
29. *Temora, an Ancient Epic Poem* (1763), p.206, n.; cited by Foerster, *Homer*, p.57. *Enquiry*, p.340.
30. *Grandison*, I, 67-86.
31. *Clarissa*, IV, 30-31; see also II, 424; IV, 451.
32. In *Lettres d' un voyageur anglais* (1779), trans. Duncombe, cit. John Nichols, *Literary Anecdotes of the Eighteenth Century* (1812), IV, 585.
33. "Richardson, Young, and the Conjectures", MP, XXII (1925), 393-399.
34. Young, *Works* (1773), V, 94.
35. No. 3 (1752).
36. Bk. IX, ch. 1.
37. See René Bray, *La Formation de la doctrine classique en France* (Paris, 1927), pp.347-349; Arthur L. Cooke, "Henry Fielding and the Writers of Heroic Romance", *PMLA*, LXII (1947), 984-994.
38. Bk. IV, ch. 1; Bk. V, ch. 1. It is interesting, incidentally, to observe that these references occur early; after the first six books of Tom Jones Fielding changes over to a more completely dramatic method, as W. L. Cross points out (*History of Henry Fielding*, II, 179). Further evidence for believing that Fielding did not take the epic analogy seriously enough to explore the critical issues fully is afforded by the fact that he took no account either of Aristotle's mention of the form of literature which represented men 'as they are in real life' (*Poetics*, ch. 2), which would presumably be the category into which *Amelia* at least would fall, or of the contemporary controversy as to whether an 'epic in prose' was not a contradiction in terms (see H. T. Swedenberg, *The Theory of the Epic in England, 1650-1800* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1944), pp.155, 158-159).

39. p.26.
40. *Joseph Andrews*, Bk. III, ch. 6.
41. *Tom Jones*, Bk. V, ch. 8.
42. Bk. IV, ch. 1.
43. *Of the Origin and Progress of Language* (Edinburgh, 1776), III, 296-298.
44. No. 8 (1752).
45. "Fielding's Amelia: An Interpretation", *ELH*, III (1936), 3-4.
46. "Ulysses, Order and Myth", *Dial*, 1923; quoted from *Forms of Modern Fiction*, ed. O' Connor (Minneapolis, 1948), p.123.
47. See *Covent Garden Journal*, Nos. 10 and 55 (1752).
48. Bk. IV, ch. 1. On this see Robert M. Wallace, "Fielding's Knowledge of History and Biography", *SP*, XLIV (1947), 89-107.
49. *Poetics*, ch. 23.
50. Fielding *Amelia*, p.2.
51. Carl van Doren, *Life of Thomas Love Peacock* (London, 1911), p.194.
52. *Henry Fielding's Theory of the Comic Prose Epic*. Madison, 1931, p.166.